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ABSTRACT

Five institutionalized severely retarded women participated in 18 group assertive training sessions to test whether new assertive behaviors could be learned and then transferred and generalized to real life situations. Pre- and post-test measures were taken on four components of assertion in trained and non-trained sets of interpersonal situations. There was a significant improvement in assertiveness in both the trained and non-trained set in the real life context. A six month follow-up showed that some gains in assertiveness remained. These findings extend the usefulness of assertive training procedures for women to those with severely diminished cognitive skills. (Author)

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Assertive Training with Institutionalized Severely Retarded Women[1]

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Running head: Assertive training with retarded women

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Abstract

Five institutionalized severely retarded women participated in eighteen group assertive training sessions to test whether new assertive behaviors could be learned and then transferred and generalized to real life situations. Pre- and post-test measures were taken on four components of assertion in trained and non-trained sets of interpersonal situations. There was a significant improvement in assertiveness in both the trained and non-trained set in the real life context. A six-month follow-up showed that some gains in assertiveness remained. These findings extend the usefulness of assertive training procedures for women to those with severely diminished cognitive skills.

The role expectancies inherent in being retarded, in being institutionalized, and in being a woman all converge at one point: the greater likelihood that passive-dependent rather than assertive strategies will be used to cope with interpersonal situations. Among severely retarded women the problem of passive dependency is further compounded by the fact that they are less likely to possess adequate cognitive and verbal skills for effective assertiveness in interpersonal situations.

Assertive training has been shown to be a successful treatment approach for habilitating deficient interpersonal behaviors of individuals with diverse diagnostic labels (Hersen et. al., 1973), including a group of educable retarded men (Klein and Paluck, 1975). The present study was designed to test whether existing assertive training techniques, modified for application to those with limited expressive language, could facilitate assertive responses which are useful to the severely retarded in their institutional setting.

The assertive training procedures used in the present study were the demonstrably successful combinations of modeling plus role-playing (Friedman, 1971), modeling plus instructions (Hersen et al., 1973), and behavioral rehearsal plus performance feedback (McFall and Marston, 1970). Video feedback (Serber, 1972) was occasionally presented, and a group context was used to provide additional models, reinforcement, and support (Alberti and Emmons, 1970). An attempt was also made to assess whether newly learned assertive responses would transfer from the group

setting to one in the real life of the institution, and whether these assertive behaviors generalized to similar non-trained assertion-requiring situations in the institutional setting.

METHOD

Subjects

Five female residents of the Margaret Chapman School participated. Their mean I.Q. was 32 (range 22-50) and mean age 26 (range 17-35). All could follow simple instructions, could indicate basic needs through words, and scored at or below a specified low value on the pretext for assertiveness described below.

Assertive Situations

A training and a non-training set of four interpersonal situations each were designed, based on instances commonly occuring in the Ss' life. All eight encounters required an assertive response. The four training situations of Set one were: A) the invader demands use of S's chair; B) the invader shakes the table S is working on; C) the invader demands the candy S has earned and is eating; and D) the invader stands in front of the TV which S is watching. The four non-training situations of Set two were: E) the invader pushes the S off her seat; F) the invader berates S's drawing work; G) the invader grabs S's candy; and H) the invader changes the channel of the TV which S is watching and then shuts it off.

Pretest

All Ss were tested on their response to all eight situations in their real life environment prior to any training. The invader was another school resident trained for the confederate role. Two trained observers rated the degree of assertion for each response along four components of assertiveness. Each component was measured on a five point scale. Interobserver reliability, measuring the proportion of agreements across 128 component observations was .89. The four components of assertiveness were: Verbal Content, Eye Contact, Voice Volume, and Posture. The five point scale had specified types of responses at each point, ranging from the most submissive (1) to the most assertive (5) for each component. A mean score of 2.00 or less across all components and all eight situations of the pretest was the criterion for unassertiveness which permitted participation in the project.

Training

The group met for 18 one hour sessions with one of the authors (HW). Greeting exercises (Rimm and Masters, 1974) were practiced at the beginning of each session to facilitate interaction. During the first five group sessions these exercises were also used for shaping of nonverbal components. Thereafter, specific responses to the situations of Set one were introduced, e.g. "No, (this is) my candy". Other group members played the role of the invader, and each S practiced the response

until she reached the criterion score of 4 on all components during at least two rehearsals in the same session. The group began to learn a new situation of Set one only when all Ss had reached this criterion for the previous situation.

Posttest

For an in-group evaluation of how well the responses were learned, a group session was held 5 days after session 18. The same trained observers who had measured pretest scores were stationed on a balcony overlooking the day room. The situations of Set one were role-played by other group members. Ingroup data were taken for each S during one trial of each of the situations A,B,C and D using the same verbal and non-verbal components which had been measured in the pretest.

Out-group data, to evaluate both transfer of trained responses to Ss' real life environment and generalization of assertiveness to non-trained situations, were collected for Set one (situations A,B,C,D) and Set two (situations E,F,G,H). These data were collected beginning four days after In-group testing in the same manner as in the pretest. The confederate invader, who was the same as in the pretest, initiated two or three situations with each S over four days.

As a Follow-up measure, data were collected for Set one in the same Out-group manner after a six month period.

Data Analysis

A S's assertiveness score was the sum of the four components, summed across the four situations of the set. Each S had a pretest assertiveness score for both Set one and Set two, an In-group posttest score for Set one, an Out-group posttest score for both Set one and Set two and a Follow-up Out-group score for Set one.

The measure of learning of the training set was a comparison of the In-group posttest group mean for Set one with the pretest group mean for Set one. The measure of transfer of trained responses to the real life setting was a comparison of the Out-group posttest group mean for Set one with the pretest group mean for Set one. Generalization to non-trained situations was measured by a comparison of the Out-group posttest group mean for Set two with the pretest group mean of Set two. The measure of extinction was a comparison of the Follow-up group mean for Set one with the Out-group posttest group mean of Set one.

RESULTS

Four training sessions were required before all Ss had reached criterion levels for the response to situation A. Thereafter, four sessions were required for all to master situation B, two for situation C, and one for situation D.

The mean pretest group score for Set one was 31.6 (SD=3.50). The mean posttest In-group score across all Ss for Set one was 64.20 (SD=.89). These means were significantly different ($t=17.53$, $df=4$, $p<.001$). Thus, the group members learned the assertive components in the group setting.

Posttest measures for Set one, taken as Out-group data, showed a mean across all Ss of 61.20 (SD=2.56). This mean was also significantly greater than the prettest group mean of Set one ($t=17.50$, $df=4$ $p<.001$). Thus the assertive responses learned in the group transferred to identical situations in the real life setting.

The pretest group mean for Set two was 29.80 (SD=4.45). The posttest Out-group mean for Set two was 52.80 (SD=11.30). This posttest mean was significantly greater than the pretest mean ($t=6.08$, $df=4$, $p<.01$). Thus, the learned assertive responses generalized to real life situations which were similar but not identical to those presented in group.

The Follow-up Out-group mean across all Ss for Set one was 42.80 (SD=14.06). The mean for the Out-group posttest was 61.20 (SD=2.56). These means were significantly different ($t=3.35$, $df=4$, $p<.05$). Thus, there was a decrement in the learned responses after six months, though they had not entirely been lost, since the pretest Set one mean was 31.6 (SD=3.50).

T-tests were also used to evaluate pre-and posttest differences for each of the four assertive components. For Set one, there was a significant improvement in three of the components: Eye Contact (In-group $t=6.32$, $df=4$, $p<.01$; Out-group $t=4.80$, $df=4$, $p<.01$): Voice Volume (In-group $t=38.52$, $df=4$, $p<.001$; Out-group $t=27.52$ $df=4$, $p<.001$): and Content (In-group $t=35.68$, $df=4$, $p<.001$; Out-group $t=25.49$ $df=4$, $p<.001$). Posture improved but not significantly for this set (In-group $t=1.50$, $df=4$, $p>.05$; Out-Group $t=1.90$, $df=4$, $p>.05$).

Posttest measures for the non-trained Set two showed a significant improvement in Content ($t=3.20$, $df=4$, $p<.05$); Voice Volume ($t=4.35$, $df=4$, $p<.01$); and Posture ($t=3.58$, $df=4$, $p<.01$). Eye Contact improved, but not significantly ($t=2.63$, $df=4$, $p>.05$).

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that institutionalized, severely retarded women can be taught new assertive behaviors through the procedures of assertive training. The decreasing number of sessions required by all members to learn succeeding new responses suggests that once the performance of combined verbal and non-verbal components has been learned, the verbal content can be variated more readily in association with a new stimulus situation. Thus it appears that an extensive repertoire of assertive responses may be taught through assertive training of a longer duration.

The data also indicates that assertive responses learned in the group transferred to identical situations in the real life setting and generalized to similar situations in that environment. It may be argued that transferred and generalized responses were strengthened by the fact that the same confederate invader initiated all eight interpersonal situations throughout the Out-group pre-and posttesting. However, the invader was a resident who was known by all Ss and was chosen for the role because of her tendency to initiate aggressive interactions. Thus real life situations were closely simulated during the Out-group testing. Generalization of assertive responses by some Ss was also anecdotally reported by school staff members when non-confederate assertion-requiring situations were encountered. One teacher who enjoyed a teasing interaction with an S was startled when she uttered, "Don't tease me"-a statement never practiced in group. A housemother for another very

withdrawn S noted an increase in the number of direct requests that the S made for necessary and useful supplies.

The response decrement which occurred after six months suggests, as Eisler et al. (1974) did, that adequate follow-up treatment is essential to the success of assertive training. It is encouraging, however, that much of the response was still present. Two Ss showed no decrement at all in their Verbal Content on the Follow-up throughout all four situations. This suggests that certain, as yet unspecified, personality and/or contextual variables may be involved in the full retention of a learned verbal assertive response for some individuals.

The shaping of individual non-verbal components required a considerable amount of time, five group sessions. Of the components, Eye Contact was the most difficult to train, and a good deal more shaping and reinforcement of it was necessary throughout the training of situations A,B,C, and D. The data show that Eye Contact improved significantly for the training Set one, although it generalized less well to Set two. In contrast to Eye Contact, significance level for Posture was reached only during Out-group testing of Set two. Since Eye Contact required so much training and reinforcement, Posture may not have been sufficiently trained before performance of combined components were practiced. Moreover, Ss were trained and tested for Set-one in a sitting position. Thus the degree of improvement for Posture may not have been as substantial as it was

for other components. Perhaps alternatively, a slight postural withdrawal from the stimulus person may have compensated for the achievement of Eye Contact of longer duration. In any case, the slight variation in successful training across components points to the importance, as Serber (1972) has done, of carefully training individual components and shaping and reinforcing them again when combined performance of components is required.

The training procedures of the present study render themselves especially practical for use in the institutional setting. Following successful shaping and combining of verbal and non-verbal components of assertive responses, subsequent assertive responses are relatively simple to train and, given the scarcity of clinical staff, could probably be applied by the teaching and para-professional staff. Since these staff are in a position to observe the interpersonal life of group members on a day-to-day basis, they would be able to identify their residents' response deficits easily and remediate them in their own groups. The results of this study suggest, therefore, that assertive training could be an effective, economical and relatively simple tool for fostering useful interpersonal skills in severely retarded women.

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